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Roh Facing Skepticism On Prospect for Change

South Korean Military Power Base Intact

By Fred Hiatt

Washington Post Foreign Service

SEOUL, Feb. 27—President Roh Tae Woo's sober inauguration ceremony this week was billed as South Korea's first peaceful and democratic transition of power.

Not quite, said one Korean journalist, as he watched students and police battle in the street. Half peaceful, he said, half democratic—and less than half of a transition.

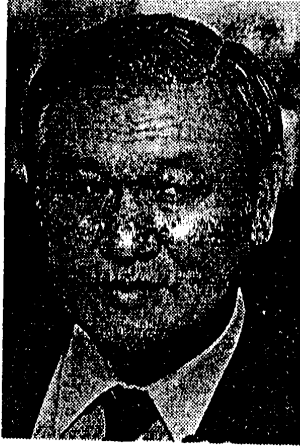
The remark did not appear to reflect the views of most Koreans, who appear to be willing to give Roh a chance. But it did reflect an almost universal uncertainty that a reformed plotter of military coups can recast himself to lead South Korea into a new age of democracy.

As Roh settled in for a five-year term after winning the first free election here in 16 years, many Koreans were asking if he is sincere in his campaign promise to remove all vestiges of authoritarian rule and, if so, whether the power structure would allow him to do so.

"The president is a different man now, but almost everything else around him is unchanged," said Choi Jang Jip, a political science professor at Korea University. "His power base of bureaucrats and military elite and big industrialists—before and after his inauguration, they are the same. The attitude and culture of political domination are not so quick to change."

At least in questions of style, Roh set a new tone. At his first Cabinet meeting, he sat at the head of a curved table with his ministers instead of at the distant and separate desk his friend and predecessor, Chun Doo Hwan, had favored.

Roh asked the ministers for their opinions instead of just lecturing them, his aides reported. He ordered that the avenue leading to the presidential mansion, long a desolate reminder of Chun's preoccupation with security and isolation, should be opened to pedestrians. And he started a trend among Ko



ROH TAE WOO
... opening avenues to the populace

rean executives, who suddenly are carrying their own briefcases.

"It's a breath of fresh air," one Korean businessman said. But when Roh announced just before the inauguration that his Cabinet would include eight key holdovers from the Chun regime, the nation's newspapers—stirring after years of censorship—said that sitting at round tables would not be enough.

The Korea Times editorialized that "more is needed than just words and gestures."

"The *raison d'être* of the Roh government is to satisfy the public wish for a long-sought power change, for which the nation underwent unprecedented political turmoil and legislative process," it said.

Indeed, many in the opposition still seem dazed by the outcome of that turmoil. After hundreds of demonstrations, thousands of firebombs, years in jail and exile, the opposition earned the election it fought for—but wound up on a familiar back bench at the inauguration.

The initial response has been to label Roh a more personable version of his predecessor.

ROH, From A25

"It proves that in essence this administration is no different from the last one," the National Council of Churches' human rights committee said today in response to Roh's partial amnesty for political prisoners, which left many dissidents in jail.

The political opposition may be recovering from the split that allowed Roh to be elected with 36.6 percent of the vote. If it unites sufficiently to win a majority in April's National Assembly elections, it could pose the first serious test of Roh's willingness to live with democracy's frustrations and constraints.

Some analysts say that, ironically, if the opposition does not unite it may pose an even greater test of Roh's commitment to democracy.

the opposition in the election, I don't think Roh can override the hard-liners," said opposition activist Lee Shin Bom. "They can say, 'Look, we have weak opposition, we can manipulate. Don't tell us we have to make changes.'"

The pessimists see intimations of continued repression in Roh's Cabinet choices, his reappointment of the director of the internal security agency, his partial amnesty.

In his inaugural address, Roh promised an end to "torture in secret chambers," the pessimists say, but how can the torturers be expected to reform themselves or release prisoners who can bear witness?

Roh also seems in no hurry to fulfill his promise to allow elections for governors, mayors and local officials, all of whom are currently appointed by the ruling party.

"It's not going to move as fast as

the most ambitious people would like to think," a western diplomat said. "This is still a very conservative administration."

The diplomat said that Roh's government may never investigate the abuses and financial scandals of the Chun administration—of which Roh was a part. But the diplomat also said that Koreans may not insist on such a calling to account. "This is an exercise in exorcising ghosts," he said. Simply by permitting discussion of past abuses, he added, "you dissipate bad feelings."

And almost everyone agrees there have been remarkable changes already. Newspapers criticize Roh, and new newspapers are springing up; once taboo subjects are openly debated; a university president who defied government demands for stiff punishments for student demonstrators has been named prime minister.

Many Koreans believe that as Roh consolidates power, the holdovers will be dismissed and greater change will gradually be visible.

"No matter what people say, the debate is more open," said one long-time government opponent. "People have real hope that they can change things."

Most of all, many Koreans believe that the process of democratization, although slower than some hoped, will be almost impossible to reverse. And through his campaign to portray himself as an "ordinary man," Roh has won a period of grace to prove himself.

Taxi driver Lee Jae Wook, 40, after listening to Roh's inaugural address, said, "I liked it. An era of ordinary people—that's the part I liked."

Asked whether Roh will keep his promises, the taxi driver said, "I believe he will try."